



A COWBOY'S MATRIMONIAL VENTURE

BY
LIEUTENANT G. DEH. BROWNE

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It was the old, old story. But, as a matter of fact, this tale throughout is of a character very commonplace. Mr. Jacob Witham wanted a wife.

In seeking, however, for a partner with whom to share his name, liberty and other hereditaments, he resorted to the not unprecedented but somewhat unconventional method of publishing his craving in the newspapers of San Francisco. Moreover, the advertisement was not hidden away in that wearisome labyrinth of type popularly termed the "want ads," but in bold face occupied at least ten squares of display. It read:

"I want a Wife.
"I am a thirty-five-year-old, a thoroughbred and square. I own 4,000 cattle, 600 horses, have \$20,000 sunk, and, barring blizzards, northerners and other visitations of a glorious climate, shall never tighten the cinch strap for hunger. Morally, I am on the fence. I drink when I please and swear at the cattle, but I would not swear at a woman. That's all. Where is the woman? She must be under 25 and show up a registered pedigree. Jacob Witham, Quindara Flat, Cal."

But Mr. Witham's aspiration, proclaimed beyond all misinterpretation, was destined to be considered by an individual manifestly unsuited to its requirements. In a cozy parlor within the aristocratic limits of San Francisco it had caught the eye of one Frederick Weldon, and to that gentleman's handsome features it brought a smile of amusement. Possibly he was contrasting the advertiser's position with his own—he was being entertained by a young girl of admirable wit and adaptability. And yet such was not the exact trend of his thoughts. Miss Dorothy Halsted was a very pretty girl and withal charming. Moreover she was, at that moment, seated beside him on a low sofa, and her faintly head seemed as if created by nature to rest confidently on some strong, male shoulder. But San Francisco was graced with many of her kind. They were all attractive; he loved the sex.

But in Mr. Witham's announcement, which he had carelessly lifted from a table at his elbow, Fred discerned an opportunity for possible diversion, and he extended it to his companion.

"Let's apply," was his suggestion. Miss Halsted smiled.

"Why not answer it? I'll write the letter and you copy it. Then we'll enclose the photo of an actress—if you can find one consistent with the idea of a 'registered pedigree'—and await results."

"But what name shall I sign?" she asked, when at last it had been copied.

"You might use a composite," was the reply. "Yes, that's it; make it Dorothy Weldon."

The young girl colored and lowered her eyes. But she accepted the suggestion, and over such a pseudonym was the letter sent.

As an epistolary precursor of future hymeneal joys it was a masterpiece—or so, at least, Fred averred. It was to be presumed that the unknown Mr. Witham was a cattle baron—i. e., a cowboy on whom fortune had smiled—therefore, all stilted elegance of phraseology was avoided. Moreover, the gentleman appeared to desire a wife considerably his junior, and for that reason a certain maidenly coyness and naïveté were necessary. But Fred was equal to the task. "Miss Weldon was ashamed, almost afraid, to address Mr. Witham. She was alone, however, with no one to advise; was what people vulgarly termed a 'shop' girl. She had also been told that gentleman in his walk of life retained much of that chivalric element of dispo-

sition long since extinct in large cities."

Meanwhile, however, there arrived a day when the newspapers again had occasion to publish Jake Witham's name. It was only a brief notice, telegraphic, and recounting the destruction by fire of Quindara Flat, the settlement wherein that gentleman resided his mail. He had been present at the time—presumably awaiting the customary letter—and had generously donated five hundred dollars to those rendered homeless.

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he said, with a seriousness to him, unusual. "He certainly appears to have a heart and a big one."

Dolly smiled, albeit somewhat satirically. "It's the dollar, not the sentiment, with you, Fred," she astutely returned. Fred made no reply. Possibly his respect for gold was a characteristic admitting no denial.

But the young girl was again perusing the report, and in the last line she encountered four words previously unnoticed: "Mr. Witham badly injured."

Her face was slightly paler as she looked up.

"He's given more than his dollars, Fred," she said, in a low tone. Fred looked grave. At the same time there was depicted in his expression a vague sense of relief.

"Well, that lets us out," he returned. "To tell the truth, Dolly, I was beginning to wonder how we could extricate ourselves gracefully."

But Fred erred, and that gravely, in believing he was to escape thus easily from the correspondence which he had begun. Three days later he was again summoned into Miss Halsted's presence, and that young lady met him with a look of blank dismay. She had received another letter from Mr. Witham and of a character vastly dissimilar to those of earlier date. Moreover, a small package accompanied the letter.

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"Here," the young girl ejaculated, almost tearfully. "He's coming here!" Fred knit his brow; manifestly he was disconcerted, and he took the letter from her hand. But there was no loophole for misconception. The writer was no longer an appealing swain, suing for favor; he had met with accident—had narrowly escaped death, and by it was warned that delay frequently entailed disaster. At the closing statement, however, Fred exhibited some slight relief. Mr. Witham did not intend "roping a wife" as he would a steer—unnannounced. He would await Miss Weldon's pleasure at the Palace hotel.

"And we'll have to meet him there," Fred declared, in a tone of desperation. "Well," the young girl exclaimed, "I'm not Miss Weldon."

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Fred winced. It had not previously occurred to him that an encounter with Mr. Witham might entail bodily discomfort.

"Do—do you suppose he'll fight?" he queried, half absently.

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"No; I don't mean that, Fred," she added. "I would not like you to get hurt. But you must see him."

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That courage, however, which is attributed to Holland appeared to have lost its potency, and he soon returned to the office. His hand trembled as he drew a card from his pocket; but it had to be done, and he tendered it to the clerk.

"Mr. Witham," he said, tersely.

Five minutes later a speaking tube wheezed, and he watched the clerk. But the suspense was of brief duration. Yes, Mr. Witham was in and would be pleased to see Mr. Weldon at once.

The bell boy, too, seemed as if bent upon hastening the calamitous work, for he at once conducted him to the door of Mr. Witham's room and tapped loudly on the panel.

"Come!" was the cheery response that floated through the transom, and Fred shuddered. Then he pulled himself together and turned the knob.

But on the threshold he paused. Mr. Witham—the "cowboy" was seated within, and of exterior he was not at all formidable. His features, albeit bearded, were boyish, pleasant and rather handsome, and his attire was that affected by a man of the world. But it was not with him that Fred was now concerned—Dorothy Halsted was seated on his knee.

Fred was like a man dazed by some sudden revelation; he seemed, almost, to stagger. But the "cowboy" smiled. Then lifting Dolly he deposited her in his own seat and advanced with extended hand.

"My wife, Mr. Weldon," he observed, lightly. "We have had her father's blessing; I trust we have yours."

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